

Three college friends are reunited by a mysterious sleeping pill known as Insynnium. Rachel, Max, and Duncan explore what their lives once were and have since become in this dark comedy about the power of secrets and the mutable nature of identity. The three will be pulled into a vortex of memories, dreams, and music that will alter all they know.

Insynnium

by Tim Cole

Order the complete book from the publisher
[Booklocker.com](https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/10108.html?s=pdf)

<https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/10108.html?s=pdf>
**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**

Insynnium



Tim Cole

Copyright © 2018 Tim Cole

ISBN: 978-1-64438-358-2

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper.

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

BookLocker.com, Inc.
2018

First Edition

Part I

Confession or Concealment

2014

-Autumn-

"It sounds like Happy, so shouldn't I be smiling?"

<10/19/14 @ 13:06>

To: r_redcalf@ymail.com

From: mmcivista73@jetmail.com

Subject: The Truth

Dear Rachel,

I don't know how to tell you what I need to tell you, so I'll just begin.

I've been keeping a secret from you; many secrets, in fact.

First of all, the root of my spontaneous skills and abilities, not to mention my overall life transformation in the past few years, have not been the result of a traumatic brain injury, but rather something much more profound and difficult to explain, like extracting light from coal, if you catch my drift.

I've been creating stories and lying to you and the boys for years now, all in an effort to avoid telling you the truth because I never thought you'd believe it.

Please don't think I'm crazy, but I've been -

“Oh shit!” said Max, as he jumped back in his chair to avoid the plummeting shower of food and beverage that was landing on him.

The girl had long toes and knocked knees, and she tripped on the back of her flip flop as she hurried past him at the crowded fast food stop. It was a pirouetting stumble that was nicely accented by the fumbling toss of her fully loaded meal tray. If he hadn’t been so absorbed in his e-mail, he might have seen the mishap coming from thirty feet away.

“Oh my god! I’m so sorry; are you alright?” said the clumsy thirteen-year-old as she awkwardly dabbed at him with a napkin.

“I’m fine, it’s okay, don’t worry about it,” he said.

In the excitement, he dropped his phone, and it was soaking up cola like a sponge. He retrieved his device from the liquid as fast as he could.

“Rhonda! What the hell? You have to watch where you’re going, girl,” said a visibly exasperated mother as she came to Max’s aid with additional paper towels.

“I’m sorry, sir. I apologize for my daughter. I can pay for your phone if it’s damaged; is it bad?”

“No, no, it’s just an accident, shit happens,” said Max.

But his phone was fucked, completely ruined.

He knew at a glance that nothing electronic could survive such a liberal dose of *Coke*. Salted french fries and hamburger sauce decorated the remainder of his table.

His act of contrition had been paralyzed in the wake of the girl's slip and fall. Gone was his latest attempt at the correspondence that was to set all matters straight. He felt the pride of his convictions evaporating, and his complicated explanation drifting away with his courage.

He continued to press the buttons on his phone with quiet desperation, but there was no response. The gadget and its contents had been lost to the cryogenics of corn syrup.

Suddenly, another fumbling teenager wearing the uniform of the franchise began escorting him to a clean table by a window. Soon the manager arrived and gave him complementary vouchers redeemable for hamburgers in the future; though he doubted he'd ever be back.

Fate had intervened.

His hands steadied as his panic ebbed. The cardiac restriction around his chest slowly gave way to a meager wave of euphoria.

Perhaps he had been too hasty, he told himself, or maybe 'thoughtless' was a better word for it. Had he not appreciated what was at stake? Of course he had, Rachel was his wife for god's sake, if anyone ought to believe him it should be her?

Recently, he'd been seized by a fixation to come clean with her; put all his cards on the table, so to speak. He wondered whether he could keep all the details straight in a somewhat plausible narrative.

Insynnium was at the root of everything, so naturally, he'd have to begin there.

The comas, he'd have to mention that.

And time travel; that was a big one.

He took a moment at the thought of the next person who came to mind; Duncan, he'd definitely have to tell her about Duncan, there was no way around that.

Duncan was there when it all began and he was the one who told Max to remain silent about the comas and the time travel. It was Duncan who helped Max understand that a lie could be more effective than the truth. But the truth should at least remain somewhere in sight, shouldn't it? Besides, where was his friend now?

Sometimes it occurred to Max that it was all a ridiculous joke at the hands of a capricious god.

He asked himself if he had in fact added one hundred and forty-three years to his life.

Yes, he thought, most certainly.

It was hard to believe, but it was true. By reliving his life in one-year segments - multiple times and multiple ways - he had arrived at a total existence of more than 1.8 centuries.

He also asked himself whether the very fabric of his character had been altered, and therefore his destiny?

Yes, he thought, definitely.

He'd led astonishing lives in a hundred and fifty different directions, and it was the labyrinth of the past that had landed him in the treasure of the present - the love of his wife and kids and a life with unending possibility.

It was this possibility, this promise of adding additional years to his life that led him to the West again. Not as a mountain biking aficionado or a compulsive rock climber - as he told friends and neighbors back home - but as a quiet camper... the quietest in fact; a hibernator; a narcoleptic traveler; an anomaly in the linear progression of time.

Perhaps this ‘activity’ he engaged in should never be revealed, not even to Rachel or the boys. The truth might be healing, but then again, it might not be, he thought. It had been ten years a lie, maybe the facts should remain locked in his skull indefinitely.

It was the third year in a row now that he’d made his anticipated trip from Manitoba to Alberta. It was a 760-mile drive across the prairies that terminated in the foothills of the Rockies, and he looked forward to every minute of it immensely.

He looked out the window toward the parking lot and saw a beat up Chevy Valiant missing a rear hubcap pull into the space next to his Land Cruiser. An overweight woman of about sixty, along with her adult son, ambled from the freshly parked car¹. The

¹#1 on the Billboard Year-End Hot 100 singles of 2014.

“**Happy**” by Pharrell Williams from the album Despicable Me 2: Original Motion Picture Soundtrack. Back Lot Music, 2013. The car just sat there, and Max stared at it while chewing his burger. Williams’ voice was on full display. It was the song from that movie he and Rachel had seen in the summer, and basically the most unavoidable tune in the nation. He watched as the doors of the car opened and cigarette smoke billowed out. Several empty

two didn't seem to notice the peculiarity of his vehicle; and why should they, he thought. Nonetheless, he subtly resented them for their obliviousness. He studied them as they shuffled toward the entrance, and decided that their curiosity had been exchanged for a strain of malignant resignation. He wondered what it was that sometimes went wrong between mothers and sons.

The son was dressed in cargo shorts with a Pac-Man tee-shirt pulled over a middle-aged paunch, and the mother held his arm with a protective expression that informed the world no wife would ever get between her and her boy.

It would be hard to properly ask the sort of question that Max held under his breath without appearing like a meddling lunatic, but he wanted to ask this mother and son if there were years in their past they would be curious to re-live.

He wanted to know if they had a favorite age or decade, a day or a year when the tide was on their side. If they could do it all over again would they live their lives the same way or would they try something new? You know, make the same choices and eat the same

cans of Mountain Dew fell to the ground and rolled beneath the wheels. A small yappy dog burst to life out of nowhere and ran between the tires. Max realized the music was a product of an amplified stereo connected to a USB. The depth of the sound ricocheted to everyone in earshot, and the entire spectacle of the awkward two disembarking from the car was as captivating as any roadside attraction charging admission.

food. Would there be more love and less hate and dances with different steps? Before death, thought Max, everyone should be given a chance to explore that place in their brain where every memory became a multitude.

He recalled the journeys he'd taken back into his own life; the release from pattern and habit, the overcoming of inhibitions, the extension of experience to raw and total ends. Life was lived by the minute and the week and the year, but it was reviewed and judged in those moments that fell outside of time.

He glanced at his watch.

In an hour he'd be in Nordegg.

In two hours he'd be setting up his camp.

There was more ahead, but the drive from Brandon was almost behind him. He would continue cautiously, keeping his jeep to the right of an endless parade of yellow dashes that led like bread crumbs to the mountains. The steering column on the road weary Toyota tended to pull hard to the left, and the pull made him think of Rachel every time he grabbed a gear.

It was no longer Max's habit to get attached to things, but he definitely felt a bond to the Toyota. The first FJ he ever drove was in Margaret River during an AUE. He supposed it was his fondness for eucalyptus trees, surfboards, and *Cold Chisel* that made him partial to the particular model, an '82 diesel extended body (FJ45). He purchased the one he was driving seven years ago from an online car broker in Australia.

He had it shipped over in pieces on a freighter from Brisbane.

Those were the days when he didn't tell Rachel what he was spending his money on, how could he? The two of them had only been back together for a month, and his grocery store hadn't even turned a profit yet. But he understood her, and he knew it was easier to seek forgiveness than permission. And so one day the Toyota showed up in the driveway as nothing more than fractions of rubber and steel stuffed into a shipping container. He could read her expression the moment she laid eyes on the sea-can full of jeep parts; it was a look of bewilderment mixed with resistance, an expression that he'd come to know well.

He single-handedly assembled the delivery and gave it a beige paint job that finished it off nicely. Rachel indulged his fixation on the FJ wholeheartedly, and over the years became attached to the vehicle in her own way. Her enduring tolerance did not, however, keep her from rolling her eyes and letting out long sighs whenever he announced that he was sinking more cash into the replacement of an obsolete headlight or the repair of a worn clutch plate.

The Toyota might have been old, he told himself, but it was perfect for his protracted camping trips. He packed a ton of supplies under its canopy and secured heavier items to the roof rack. After countless miles of freeways and potholes, the FJ kept taking him places other vehicles refused to go.

A dreamcatcher hung from the rearview mirror, and the interior held the faint smell of sweetgrass and sage. It was a smoky combination that had, over time, pressed itself into the vinyl walls and penetrated the leather seats to make the spirit of his journeys more auspicious. He'd never seen Rachel smudge his truck, but he knew it was her who was caring for his soul in her quiet Cree way. The scent inside the FJ reminded him of their tipi at Indian Days.

He almost told her everything at Thanksgiving. He wanted to, but it was complicated. Although he was born in 1973, his true age wasn't on his face, it was somewhere inside, deep in the center of his being. Maybe it was his advanced internal years that accounted for it, the desire to leave certain things between the two of them unsaid.

For Max, the truth of his life had become enormous and untouchable, and it was often plagued by the nagging fear that a dark curse was on everything. At times he thought he could hear voices forbidding him from disclosing to Rachel both his use of *Insynnium* and its time travelling side effects; it was a voice that sounded a lot like Duncan's. But the other part of him, the part that was less superstitious, said it was only his fear whispering nonsense. He knew he owed it to Rachel to come clean with her, but where on earth would he begin? And how on earth would she understand?

Across the vigor of summer, and into the presently collapsing fall, he had ventured precipitously close to

the cliff of truth; a fall from which would reveal the powerful gravity of multiple existences.

Every now and again, he would let clues slip from his tongue. Thoughts and impressions held close to his chest would drift to the floor like worn pages from a loosely bound atlas. But the unprovable subjectiveness of mind scattered maps and private dog-eared thoughts were the only evidence of the things he'd done at the edges of intoxicating places.

At a house party, just before driving west, he mentioned to a couple who'd recently returned from Machu Picchu that the most amazing thing *he* had ever witnessed was himself as an eleven-year-old child. His odd statement commenced an awkward silence, followed by the inevitable question: "McVista, what the damn hell are you going on about this time?"

Rachel and the boys, along with friends and employees, were mildly puzzled and entertained by Max's eccentric utterances. Everyone made allowances for his strange turns, however, because of his medical condition. It was a completely fictional medical condition, mind you, involving a brain injury with cognitive repercussions, but it was one he had massaged into an oddly believable truth. In any event, it was a fiction that couldn't be allowed to crumble even as random thoughts bubbled to the surface of his awareness.

His repeated experiences with Insynnium and its resultant time travel had allowed him to relive his life with enviable variation. As a result, it barely taxed his imagination to contemplate the universal appeal such

an opportunity presented to the world. What person would not want to return to a time in their life - anytime of their choosing - and relive it in any way they wanted with no repercussions or consequences in the present?

Although popular but increasingly expensive, Insynnium remained the sleep aid of choice for those in need of a little magic inside the mind. It allowed its users to dream about their lives in Technicolor clarity and with chronological accuracy. And while the dreams people had under the influence of Insynnium were astounding, they were nothing, absolutely nothing, compared to what Max McVista experienced. What interested Max was not what the drug was, but what the drug could be: a substance offering an untapped portal into another dimension; a final frontier, a pseudo-immortality of sorts.

Although Max regularly experienced the full potential of Insynnium, he actually knew very little about the drug itself. He didn't know where it came from, for example, or how its infamous seeds were germinated, and he certainly had no idea how the drug was engineered to take you to different times in your life. In these respects, he knew as much or as little as anyone else.

The mechanics, the horticulture, the history of Insynnium all remained opaque to him, and it was that failure to be one hundred percent certain of the drug's immaculate design that frightened him at a fundamental level. It also accounted for the reason he hesitated to tell Rachel everything; because it tended

to highlight the grim possibility that he was nothing more than irreversibly mad, a psychological evaluation that he knew Duncan had always maintained no matter what he'd said to the contrary.

The last time they spoke, Duncan was living in Riyadh and seemed apologetic and overly contrite. Perhaps it was all an act, thought Max; but what did it really matter whether Duncan believed him now? They were separate men, long gone separate ways. Still, it saddened Max to imagine Duncan clinging to life in the Middle East, having never known what lay deep in his soul.

Max had spent years plumbing the depths of Insynnium, but remained unable to share his time travel secret because of what Duncan convincingly told him about the perceptions of other people. How effective Duncan had been in his efforts to help, thought Max, not to mention his ability to harm.

Though Duncan told Max that he no longer took Insynnium, Max couldn't help but feel that Duncan was weirdly attached to the drug in some other way. He imagined Duncan's connection to Insynnium, however, to be slightly different than his own; more umbilical, more inseparable. Like a source of magic that delivered him light for the price of darkness.

It was a feeling, nothing more.

Max pushed Duncan from his mind, and his eyes came to rest on a photo of Rachel that he carried in his wallet. It was a picture taken in sepia from a vacation in the Okanogan and it looked a hundred years old. He

put his wallet back in his pocket and got up to leave the restaurant.

A whirlwind of dead leaves was moving across the parking lot, and the air was dry and alive with static. The scattered gravel looked like flint, and the sky was flammable.

2014

-Autumn-

*“I can’t actually say I’ve had lipstick on
my passport, but...”*

Duncan wore a brown fedora with black Ray-Bans. His hat and glasses were highly complimentary to the faux-beard that he glued to his chin. It was a simple but effective disguise he’d been donning variations of for the better part of two years. He stepped lightly around town and attempted to stir up minimal interest with his nocturnal movements.

He walked in from the street where he’d been peering into windows and looking down alleys with the hope of getting to know what awaited him². He

²#6 on the Billboard Year-End Hot 100 singles of 2014. “**Talk Dirty**” by Jason Derulo featuring 2 Chainz from the album *Talk Dirty*. Beluga Heights, Atlantic, 2014. The underground clubs played American stuff all night. The Cuban booty was impressive, even after months on the island. Duncan decided to leave through the back door, though. The vibe was too, how do you say, millennial; or was it millenarian? This was another generation bumping, and he was twice their age. The base and the beat predicted something was coming. Out on the avenue, in the humid licks of wind, there were uniformed boys trying to collect paychecks with their badges. He smiled and walked past

told himself it was one of two things: either the police would tighten their snare and he'd be nabbed, or their sudden interest in the backwater village would wane, and his freedom would once again return.

Manzanillo was quiet as a rule, only minor sounds; nothing like the tremendous rush of sirens and boots that moved over the roads and bridges fifty minutes earlier. There had been choppers in the air with their spotlights aimed at the ground, and bloodhounds on the trail of disappearing scents. The authorities were definitely after someone. Duncan couldn't be sure, but he swore the experience was the same one that Pierre described when French investigators closed in on him.

He unlocked the door and slowly entered his apartment. He went to the fridge and took out a premixed daiquiri and poured himself a glass. He indulgently sipped the cocktail under the dim and expiring light of the kitchen. There were a finite number of ways to encounter your fate, he thought, and be damned if he'd be taken without a drink. He felt oddly protected by the rush of rum in his veins. There was a full moon, and everything was filled with stillness, except for a distant wood chime he could faintly hear bumping in the breeze.

them. The real hunters were hiding in the periphery. They were identifying profiles and waiting; being clever, and piecing together clues. He felt like Robert Leon Davis, or maybe Keyser Soze, but in all truth he was probably more akin to some nameless hacker in a deserted Romanian village.

* * *

He didn't know if he had the mettle to stand up under interrogation and torture. Nor did he know, in the event that he was captured, what techniques they might use to extract the secret from his head. The only thing he knew for certain was that if they succeeded in obtaining what they were after, then Grace would perish, just as sure as the curse had predicted.

Who 'they' were, was anybody's guess: secret police, Russian mafia, big pharma henchman, the list went on. It was all because of Grace that Duncan did the things he did because, in the end, it was her that he loved more than any other. His love for her was also the reason she had no idea that he was still in Cuba. For her safety, he said that he moved to Riyadh to conduct statistical research for the Kingdom. But of course, he remained in *Manzanillo*, the same place he'd been when she visited in the winter. They met in Havana; he told her he was living there, somewhere in the San Miguel district.

Over the past decade, he had done everything he could to be free of the curse, but he knew that freedom from something so dark could only be achieved through the lightness of anonymity. The nature of what he knew required him to shroud himself in mystery and remain completely at large. After all, someone with his money and influence could've made a decision to live in regal opulence years ago. But here he was, tenaciously hiding in a solitary part of a communist-held island where no one knew his name.

For Duncan, hiding was its own way of living. His curious life had evolved special skills and talents to blend in and be immemorable. The key was to make everything spartanly plain and reliably simple, such as his appearance and his needs. The only person that ever knew his true whereabouts was Pierre. Others, including Grace and Max, were often under the impression that he was in places like Beirut or Damascus. And detectives and bounty hunters operated with the mistaken assumption that he would eventually be spotted on the streets of Bixby Knolls, Fitzroy North, or York Mills, all of which were random and completely misleading.

It wasn't exactly an accident that he landed in Cuba; it was more like bad advice. But at any rate, he soon realized he wasn't just temporarily marooned in the equatorial heat, but rather permanently fastened by some tropical weld. It could be worse, he thought, he could be fastened to Montreal or Toronto – the anti-tropics by his estimate – where he'd be forced to flee north to homes hung with icicles, suicidal Eskimos, and permafrost beaches. He had to admit, though, that at least in the cold and distinct seasons of Canada he might have found contiguous places to hide, unlike Cuba, where the inescapable water formed an infinite mote.

He wanted nothing more than to exit the island, but somewhere along the line he found himself trapped and without a soul to trust. He told himself there was nothing he could do but lay low and wait for the storm to pass. He suffered from a hurricane of

thoughts as bits and pieces of his confidence blew loose.

His apartment was on the third floor of a converted hotel in a derelict part of town. The place was vented with a rum vapor breeze, and geckos covered the walls with their lizard aroma. There was a line of ants marching with weathered intention from the cramped kitchen to a mahogany bookcase with titles salvaged from a second-hand vendor. On a salty bamboo shelf between Grace's birthday card and Pierre's bottle of wine rested a manila envelope full of snapshots taken from days gone by. Duncan liked to reach into the envelope and pull out pictures at random so he could touch the exposed memories with his hands.

He looked at a photo of Max in Arcata. He decided it must have been taken in 2004 - shortly after his first coma - because he still had that weird look of obsessed panic written all over his features. As Duncan recalled, it was a look that took weeks to dissipate, if in fact it ever dissipated at all. Max's coma was so shocking it would have been impossible for anyone to forget. It rocked Duncan and Pierre back on their heels and left them dazed like punchy fighters clinging to the ropes.

And then there was the follow-up combination that nearly knocked them to the canvas as he recounted his time travel; a story that was completely outrageous, even in an outrageous world. It made Duncan uneasy to think about Max's brush with insanity. In those early days, he and Pierre had no idea

what they'd unleashed or how long it would follow them.

Years had gone by, and probably more than a hundred million people, in the grip of a global fascination, had ingested *Insynnium*, a godsend for insomniacs and sentimentalists alike. But no one ever claimed to time travel on the shit, except Max. It was like saying that you'd witnessed the birth of India on *Ambien*, or drank tea with Genghis Khan while lounging on *Lunesta*. It was beyond improbable, and Duncan felt it called into question the stability of any mind that would entertain such a notion.

Although he and Max, in large part, had gone their separate directions, it still irritated him to know that Max maintained his obsessive ways. Max's pursuit of alternative universes was as firm and unshakable as anything Duncan had ever encountered.

It also irritated him that Max had gone back to Rachel. He tried to keep the two apart, but mistakes were made, and hearts were reunified. He wanted to soften his disdain for her, but it was a Sisyphean task. She had a history of deep subconscious awareness and a tectonic ability to psychologically fracture those of less resilient constitutions (namely Max), and Duncan resented her for it. He knew Rachel would eventually coax Max into telling her everything; it was simply a matter of time. Love did strange things to the mind, he thought. After all, it was love that led him to such an unusual existence himself.

The last time the two men spoke, Max said he was on the verge of disclosing everything to her. Duncan

was certain that she was casting her extractive spells on Max's mind, pushing for a confession without appearing to be pushing for a confession. In the end, it all came down to how attached he was to his secret. For Max, giving up the goods would be like giving up an appendage. He'd held on to the fiction of his life for so many years, thought Duncan, it would be doubtful whether a confession could even set him free.

Duncan convinced Max that skeptical minds would never believe his time travel assertions. And in his heart Max knew it wasn't a believable story; he had no proof, no evidence. He knew he ran the risk of alienating Rachel and losing his boys again. Duncan told him that if he went to the media, they would paint him with an insanity brush and make him out to be a nut. If he went to the doctors there would be DSM IV categories and fuddled prescriptions for psychotropic meds that would probably lead to involuntary commitment. Duncan asked Max how easy it would be to run a business on lithium. The prospect of these many eventualities was at the core of the two men's enduring pact never to mention comas or time travel.

Duncan always held fast to Pierre's convincing diagnosis that Max's comas were the result of an allergic reaction to Insynnium. It seemed like a logical and medically competent explanation. However, in his last conversation, the professor had changed the prognosis. Pierre said that he'd anonymously posted Max the Rosetta stone to the entire time travel conundrum. But Max never mentioned receiving a delivery from Pierre, and he was definitely the sort of

person who would mention such a thing. Maybe Pierre hadn't sent Max anything, thought Duncan. Maybe Pierre's words were the delusional ramblings of a man suffering under the duress of French authorities or Slovakian torturers?

The line between myth and reality had begun to blur.

The creeping bacterium of paranoia was a septic and festering issue with Duncan, and it converted every optimistic notion into a dead end of double meanings and tangled motives. He had long lived with the hard burden of keeping the secret to *Insynnium* hidden. It was difficult for him to imagine a time when he hadn't known such things. He tried to convince himself it was a burden that he could unyoke from by allowing the drug to recede into dormancy; however improbable that might be.

* * *

The bulb in the kitchen finally died, and he sat in the dark with another daiquiri while the moon sent a slice of light through the windowpane. A knock at the door forced him to emerge from his mildly intoxicated thoughts. He wanted the knocking to go away. He thought perhaps the callers had an incorrect address, but the pounding persisted. He decided to answer, but he knew that he should have been somewhere else, somewhere miles up a river or huddled in a mountain cabin. He remembered the revolver in his bureau and the three cartridges resting in its cylinder. He retrieved the side arm and stuffed it down the back of his

trousers. He went to the door and opened it. There was a man standing in the hallway wearing khakis and a sweaty polo.

“Mr. Vincent Fairintosh?” said the man.

Duncan studied the man’s unflinching features with a vexed expression. He was conscious of something, something hidden and long forgotten. The feeling was dark and vague like the rage before a murder, but soon his better senses returned, and he answered.

“I’m sorry; you must have the wrong apartment.”

“Well, I’ll be damned?” said the man in a not unfriendly tone, “Would you mind if we asked you a couple of questions anyway?”

The man’s partner came out from among the shadows, and that’s when Duncan noticed the two were wearing badges on their belts.

As he stood in the frame of the doorway, he thought of Insynnium, with its simple secret and its deadly curse; sustaining and haunting him for so long. He thought about Grace and the love that she’d given him. He thought about the great friendships of Max and Pierre, as well as the deep disappointment of Rachel. He thought of their fates intertwined through the years such as they were. Then suddenly, every thought left his head, except for the one that told him to run.

He stepped back into his apartment and slammed the door. He turned the deadbolt into the strike plate and wedged a chair under the brass knob. He climbed onto the wrought iron balcony and tossed a rope over

the edge where a fire escape had once been. He slid down three floors with his hands on fire until his shoes hit the pavement; then he ran. He ran for his life through the narrow streets, and away from the cops and the dogs.

PART II

*Everything Begins
Somewhere*

2003

-Autumn-

“What’s got me looking so crazy these days?”

It had been close to a month, and she knew his voice would make her uneasy; he’d slur his words as he told her he was coming to see the boys someday soon. She found him more unsettling each time; the warped convictions of a drunkard holding onto that which should not be held onto. She knew there’d be a rough-edged argument between the two of them, doomed to end in a fight. The points at issue were both obvious and inconspicuous.

She sat on the leather sofa near the wood burner. The faint whiffs of smoke escaping its vents entered her nose and connected with a part of her that found calm in the presence of a seasonal fire. The heat from the flames was turning the cast iron a dull red and its warmth radiated to her face with a steady persistence. The ‘42 pot belly stove had taken the chill off the house for years, and the present night was no exception.

Hugh had been over earlier to clean the chimney and check the flue. The boys were sleeping upstairs, and she was re-reading *Selected Stories*; short fiction with titles like, *Simon’s Luck* and, *The Turkey Season*.

Max's mother gave her the book when she came to visit after his father passed away. She always thought of her mother-in-law when she read Alice Munro's captivating prose; tales of Canadian woman shorn of securities and forced to be resilient, but also weak and obsequious; and oddly, she thought, there was something to that as well.

She loved Canada, and she loved living in Brandon. She often got the sense that people had trouble understanding her choice; especially friends from college who seemed to imply that it was a failure to return to your hometown after you'd had a taste of grander and more sophisticated fare. Maybe they were right. Maybe she should have gone abroad or made her life in Kitsilano or the Glebe. But the Plains were her home, and they'd been her home long before her existence was one of flesh. She could hear the wind blowing across the prairies with a sharper ear than most, and what it revealed in the rustled movements of tall grass and ripened grain was the words of the Great Spirit telling her how to breathe.

It was subtle in the blood, her attachment to Manitoba, but it lurked and coursed beneath her skin just as sure as Dauphin Lake held water. She knew Max was a person of place as well, but his fear and hopelessness had pushed him outside of their home. She was no longer sure what his commitment to her was, but she was strong in her resolve to stay put.

She thought about the fly fishing trips that she and Max once took to Atikaki Provincial Park. The two of them would lay by the bulrushes and drink from the

river. It was like they were resetting their vows on those long days of sun and rain. She loved being with him among the silent eyes and nibbling preoccupations of the deer and the pheasants. It was a world the opposite of asphalt and microwaves. It was an Eden of peace and sober green.

Before the children were born, she would go cross country skiing and ice fishing, especially further north at Riding Mountain. She and Max enjoyed winter camping in those regions as well, sometimes venturing on snowmobiles to points far beyond. The hibernal elements were good for their health and vitality. It froze the noise and ambition of the modern distracted life they were supposed to be chasing. On those occasions, there was only the white reticence of nature to still the mind and keep the heart alive.

Her solitary picnic along the Assiniboine River the other day made her wonder how she and Max had gone from wild embraces in long meadow grasses or on orange speckled tundra to the sad and estranged arrangement of the present.

The cold weather was moving in, and as she had since childhood, Rachel found herself growing plump in attractive and unexpected ways; mammalian and warm. The additional layer of fat was somewhat embarrassing, but it enhanced her constitution and gave her a beautiful glow beneath every snowflake that fell. The irony of her seasonal resistance elicited hugs and compliments from folks around town who were captivated by the gravity of her wintery aura.

Her thoughts drifted to the Northern Flickers living in the old poplar behind the house, pecking out their plan to fly south. She'd watched the duo since late summer and wondered when they would finally leave. The pair seemed strained to abandon their nest in a tree soon to be bearing hard frost. She wanted the birds to go, to fly off in the final throws of fall. Someone told her that the Northern Flicker mates for life, but like so many things of late, she found it hard to believe.

She was struggling to come to terms with what Kelly told her at the hairdresser's. Kelly said she'd heard rumors that Max had been sleeping with a cheerleader over the summer. The news stung Rachel like a slap in the face. She felt her cheeks turn crimson with shame for what others in the community knew to be her life with such a philandering drunk.

She was a social worker who'd stumbled in the management of her own dismal case. Her pride made her ashamed for her weaknesses, and the weaknesses of her husband. Max had totally quit on his boys, they barely knew him at all. And he had absolutely given up on her. The boys needed their father, but his drinking made him too much of a risk for them to be left with him. She knew it broke his heart to take the boys, but sole custody was the only option. Otherwise, god only knew what would happen.

Max made attempts to see Kevin and Josh about once a fortnight, but he was notoriously unreliable because of the distance he had to cover to get there. He'd moved back to his mom's place at Nipawin. It

was his choice. Rachel wanted him to remain in Brandon with her and the boys, but he wouldn't hear of it. He made it abundantly clear through his actions how tepid his valuation of her wishes were. He was lucky his mom took him in, thought Rachel; few parents would be as understanding as she. Rachel spoke with her on the phone now and again, and she sounded strong as ever, but she was certain that Max's mother had suffered much in the vortex of her son's alcoholic spiral.

Rachel could only guess what filled Max's days. Aside from visiting with his mom, fishing, and feeding the animals, she assumed that he passed listless hours imbibing tumblers of whiskey at the local tavern. When she last saw him, his skin had the hard-bitten redness of that seen among street people fighting with addictions; it was a permanent change in the living fabric that was hard to erase. He'd become malnourished and physically weak from a fundamentally alcohol diet. His once luminous blue eyes were dim as they moved with deserted interest behind prematurely gray bangs.

It was the saddest surrender of her life to watch the man she loved so intensely self-destruct. She was unable to know whether to be thankful or frustrated with her inability to see her husband's future. Although, with a little guess work she could easily surmise what was headed his way.

She knew how it started, but there was no definitive beginning, as such. From the first time she met him, he drank, but then again, so did she. They

drank socially like people drink, until one day he was drinking a whole lot more. She noticed his glass of wine turn into a bottle at dinner, and he mentioned that his job was stressful. She saw his can of beer turn into three fingers of bourbon, and he said that he was worried about his brother. She tried to say something to him, but then his dad passed away and a sad comfort formed in the unending wake.

There was one event, however, more than any other, which anchored him to his unquenchable thirst: the death of Aubrey Fender.

Aubrey was a seventeen-year-old kid in his last year of high school, and he worked part time for Max at Tucker's car wash out on Veteran's Way until he was murdered in cold blood. The boy's parents told the police that their son had gone back to the car wash to retrieve a textbook he'd forgotten there the night before. He walked in on a drug deal and was shot dead.

After Aubrey died, Max became lost to the spirits.

Nobody in town, including the boy's family, ever blamed Max, but Max blamed himself. He felt he'd made a series of poor decisions that led to Aubrey's death, and Rachel could find no way to dissuade him from that position. Her brother, Darcy, was also involved in the shooting, and that, too, complicated matters in unforeseen ways.

She watched like a reluctant accomplice as Max took unbearable quantities of liquor into his already leaden soul. He was a man actively drowning himself. But sometimes it appeared to be more than guilt

pulling him to the bottom of the well; he was using booze to sink other regrets as well.

Following months of inebriation and consistent unemployment, he started frequenting a run-down pub on Ninth Street that had a reputation for serving Brandon's most inveterate winos. Rachel's tolerance for her husband's behavior was near its breaking point when he unexpectedly announced that he was going to work on a drilling rig in Alberta. Though he left three sheets to the wind, she hoped he would return as the man she once knew; it was a foolish expectation. He would be gone for weeks at a time, and then arrive back in town with nothing on his mind but gambling and booze. She and the boys ended up with the remainder of his money and attention, which was bupkis.

He drank while on his way to see the boys because she could smell it on his breath. She also heard that he was driving with a suspended license. She wondered if she really needed more reasons to bring a motion before the court to have his visitations suspended. She didn't want the boys to see their father fall apart the same way she'd watched her own dad go to pieces.

And then there was Rachel's mother, Cassandra; a storm of negative influence who constantly bemoaned her daughter's domestic problems. Cassandra despised Max, and spoke so unkindly of him behind his back that her explosive vituperation often left Rachel frightened. As the responsible daughter she was forced to rub her mother's feet and give reminders about blood pressure and fragile arteries. She knew

her mother would have preferred to see her married to someone like Hugh Dempsey.

The thought of Hugh made Rachel sigh.

Her good friend, Kelly, said the best way for a woman to move on was to have an affair. But Rachel rolled her eyes at her friend's suggestion. A fling, given her circumstance, was akin to going fishing in an earthquake. It was hard for her to imagine fulfilling the need for intimacy with a guy she barely knew. And although Max had made stupid choices, Rachel wasn't about to complicate matters by sleeping with a neighbor.

A few weeks back, she joined Kelly and her husband, Daryl, on a night out that featured Hugh. Was it a date? Who knew? It seemed rather ridiculous at their age, she thought. Nonetheless, the four went bowling, and Hugh was cool.³ He was handsome like

³#4 on the Billboard Year-End Hot 100 singles of 2003. **“Crazy in Love”** by Beyoncé featuring Jay Z from the album *Dangerously in Love*. Columbia, 2003. The song was infectious, thought Rachel, the R&B funk. It pushed up against the walls of the bowling alley and made everyone in the lanes want to groove; even in Brandon, where 90% of people polled were country music fans. Rachel felt the remnants of her youth swirling around inside her overweight life. Joy under layers of sadness; silk under blankets of burlap. Fugitive emotions buried by inertia. And although they were merely rolling balls at pins, Beyoncé's music made it feel like they were dancing and vibrating and playing with temptation.

a pilot crossed with a cowboy. She thought she recognized him from another time, and then suddenly she realized she did. He was no stranger. He'd grown up in Brandon and shared a seventh-grade classroom with her at P.F. Westlock Junior High. He'd studied agriculture in Winnipeg and lived there for awhile until he came back to Brandon to look after his ailing mother. He was charming and kind, but Rachel made a point to remind him that she was still a married woman.

She couldn't decide if she said something brilliant or utterly stupid on the night they got reacquainted because soon he began dropping by her house on a regular basis. She explained her situation clearly, and he told her he understood, but sometimes she wasn't so sure that he got the picture. She probably needed to be more like her mom on some occasions. Cassandra would have told him to fuck off if she didn't like his advances, no matter how innocent or mistaken they might have been. Rachel, however, seemed to feel the need to walk a socially inoffensive line. She affected a demeanor that accommodated Hugh's efforts and yet didn't lead him on, or so she liked to think.

He was mechanical and good with his hands, so the garden and the house went through some needed repairs; the sort of seasonal maintenance to which Max's neglect had brought rot. Rachel offered to pay Hugh for his work, but he wouldn't accept. She never blushed at his generosity, and she secretly enjoyed the free attention in ways she didn't care to elaborate on.

There were aspects of Hugh's patient ways that reminded her of Max at his best, and she couldn't deny that she wasn't drawn to those parts of the man that were replacing her husband's. The boys felt it too. Whenever Hugh came over, he made time for Kevin and Josh's street hockey or softball. The boys expected him to entertain their childish rules and inventions, and to those ends he did his best. Rachel appreciated the simple example that he set.

She wanted to put the brakes on her 'relationship' with him - whatever it was or might become - but the situation was strangely complicated. Soon after getting to know him again, she had a dream where he was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease. She would never breathe a word about the illness that was to befall him because she never discussed with people their futures, especially if they couldn't be changed - and Hugh's clearly couldn't. So, she continued accepting his helping gestures even if they hinted at the promise of something more. Providing hope, after all, was the least she could do in light of what she'd come to know.

"So what happened between you two?" said Hugh earlier in the evening when Rachel returned to the kitchen after putting the boys to bed.

"We stopped talking, I guess," she said. "Somewhere along the way, you know, we just sort of stopped connecting with one another."

"Because of the drinking?" said Hugh.

"Yeah mostly, you can imagine how hard it is for me to see him shitfaced all the time."

“You still love him?” said Hugh.

“Wow, that’s personal.”

“Sorry,” he said.

“I haven’t given up on him if that’s what you mean?” she said defensively.

She collected herself and thought about her emotions and all the strange chemical routes that they took through her system.

“Look,” she said with emphasis, “I’ll never not love him. I just wish I could rescue him or do something for him. I’d do anything for him if he’d just ask.”

“So what are you going to do?” said Hugh. “For yourself, I mean?”

The implication of Hugh’s question pointed to places that Rachel didn’t care to go.

“I don’t know,” she replied, and then she turned her head and looked out the window and into the darkness of the coming winter.

“I’ll stop by and see you when I get back from Estevan, how’s that?” he said, with a big hopeful grin.

Again, she didn’t care for the meaning attached to the subtext of what he was saying; she felt like she was projecting the stranded damsel persona, and she’d always hated that about women who were in situations like hers.

“That would be fine, Hugh, thanks,” she replied with a gentle smile.

After he left the house, she felt like a sinner for everything she was doing, but mostly for the things that she wasn’t. She distracted herself by calling Kelly

to remind her of their lunch date. She made a point to thank Kelly for being kind and well intentioned. The two women made plans to go bowling again the following weekend.

Rachel braced herself against the cold emptiness that was creeping into her home and creeping into her life. She was a character in a story. A woman in a house with a stove on fire and two kiddos upstairs under the covers; she wanted to pull the blanket over her head and hide from the world, if only for an evening.

She understood the importance of who you spend your time with, because shared hours like those could never be undone or forgotten, they could only be enjoyed or regretted. Almost every other night she had a variation on the same poignant dream, a dream where she and Max were together. But not all her dreams were premonitions, and she knew this only too well. She often found herself awake in the early hours of the morning with tears on her face, mourning the loss of something that no longer existed, except as a memory.

The fire burned low as her stomach grumbled and her eyes grew heavy. She picked up the book and tried to read.

2003

-Autumn-

"I'm totally unwell, but what of it?"

It was mid-morning, and Max was at the Arrowhead Tavern with a couple of beers under his belt when the ring tone on his phone went off.

ACDC - Back in Black.

"Hello?"

The voice on the other end was instantly recognizable. The man spoke with a serpentine elegance, a velvet glove comfortably at ease with difficult conversations; unforgettable.

Six years had passed, and Duncan called Max out of nowhere.

"I have a paper to deliver for an engineering conference at the University of Saskatchewan. I don't know if you can make it over from Brandon, but if you could, I'd like to see you again."

"I'm not in Brandon anymore," said Max.

"Well, where the hell are you then? Yellowknife?" kidded Duncan.

It seemed weird, Duncan's calling. But it pleased Max in a comforting way. Listening to Duncan's voice over the phone put him in mind of their college

days, and for the first time in a long time he sensed an emotion close to hope.

"I'm back at Nipawin on the farm," he said, "I'm sort of helping Mom look after the place."

"I see," said Duncan, the tone of his voice suggesting he didn't trust a word from Max's mouth, "Well, see if you can meet me in Saskatoon for the weekend," he coaxed, "They're putting me up in the Delta Bessborough on Spadina. We'll raise some hell. It'll be like old times."

There were about five seconds of silence as Max considered the offer. Rachel had sole custody of his children 350 miles from where he lived, he was currently in between jobs - to say the least - and he figured his mom could probably feed the chickens for the weekend.

"Okay, I'll be there," he said.

"Oh, and one other thing," said Duncan, "Don't tell anybody I've been in contact with you. Not Rachel, or your mom, or anyone else. I'd like to keep it just between the two of us for awhile. Is that cool?"

"Fine with me," said Max.

In college, Max told a well worn joke that Saskatchewan was so flat you could watch a dog run away for three days. He wasn't watching for stray canines, though, as he drove across the province. He was watching for the Mounties. He knew that they had an affinity for hiding their ghost cars in plain sight, and he also knew that they'd throw his ass behind bars if they caught him driving under the influence again.

He slipped into Saskatoon before dark using back roads and side streets. His precautions to avoid entanglements with the police were negated, however, when he boldly chose to park his truck downtown.

When he walked into the Delta Bessborough, he saw Duncan at the far end of the lobby charming the clothes off a curvaceous engineering student from Prince George. The ease with which he was able to spot his former college roommate irritated him in an atavistic way. It seemed a godless and unforgiving world that allowed Duncan to slip past the grapples of whatever it was that crushed the balls of lesser men.

As he approached his friend, he could almost physically observe the magnetic pull of Duncan's magical pheromones as they extracted every ounce of resistance the young lady was capable of offering. Duncan's unyielding gravitation had the woman running her hands across his shoulders and reflecting a look that shamelessly revealed the extent of her primal urges.

Fuck, he thought, as he walked up to say hello, some things never change.

Duncan turned, and a broad grin came across his face. He pulled Max close in an embrace that felt almost desperate.

"Christ, it's good to see you, man!" said Duncan, as he looked at Max with wonder. "Nancy, this is Max; Max, Nancy."

"Hey," said Max, as he was introduced to a flirtatious redhead who looked as though she were fighting to suppress an orgasm.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd spoken to a woman so physically attractive.

"We haven't seen each other in like, what, six years, eh Brother?" said Duncan.

They might have been like brothers once, thought Max, but what of it remained to be seen.

"Something like that," he said.

"Well, it's nice to meet you," said Nancy, "I imagine that the two of you have a good deal of catching up to do. Keep him out of trouble, will you, Max."

She gave Duncan a sexy pout and then bid both men adieu.

The two watched as she made her way to the elevator in a dark Versace skirt and sharp Prada heels.

Duncan turned to Max with a serious face.

"Sorry about your dad."

"Huh?" said Max.

"You called to tell me about him three years ago," said Duncan, "I just never called back. It's how I had your number in case you were wondering."

"I wasn't wondering," said Max. He needed a drink.

Duncan was candid as to why he'd tracked Max down after such a long time. He told Max that he'd had enough with the grudge and the *persona non grata*. He said he wanted Max back in his life and that he missed the connection the two men once shared. Duncan was so earnest about everything that Max feared his friend was about to tell him he'd found Jesus.

It was hard to dislike Duncan in the same way that it was hard to dislike your favorite animal. If you were a dog lover, he was a dog; if you liked cats, then he was a cat. In a manner of speaking, you could say that he carried the mark of the beast. Although logic informed you that he was the opposite of vulnerable, you still wanted to protect him in the same way you would defend a pet. You were more than yourself in his presence, as though his proximity gave you an untapped social confidence.

Initially, Max tried to resist the seductive flash of Duncan's reentry into his life. He wanted to hold onto his grievances, those simmering resentments. But it wasn't long before he was swept up in the magic of Duncan's company. The conversations were better than he expected. The slices of humor still sharp among mannerisms that could never be duplicated. The burden of bearing hard feelings began to lift and dissolve.

The two men went over the main events of their lives since they'd last seen each another. Duncan told Max that he still hadn't found Mrs. Right; which, of course, was no surprise given what Max had seen in the lobby only hours earlier. By Max's estimate though, except for women, Duncan's life had been largely consumed by academic pursuits and uninteresting vacations. It was hard for Max to fathom, but Duncan seemed to have become almost tame.

At around seven, the two went up to their room, and Duncan asked Max if he wanted to get high

before they went out on the town. Max looked at Duncan with the resigned eyes of an alcoholic.

"I don't touch dope no more," he said, as he opened a can of Coors.

"That's cool," said Duncan, almost apologetically.

He put away his pipe and decided to indulge Max with a cocktail instead. After two or three rum and Coke, Duncan told Max that he looked like shit, and the two had a good laugh about that.

Max *did* inarguably look like shit.

He had a beer gut that forced him to fart whenever he pulled on his boots, and there was no doubt from outward appearances as to the maladies of his innards. There were also a number of poorly chosen tattoos that decorated his arms down to the wrists, including several he didn't remembered getting. But the worst was his wasted pasty skin so clammy to the touch. For Duncan, shaking his hand was like squeezing a fish paw. Age had not crept up on Maximilian with evasiveness; it had clobbered him over the head with its hourglass mallet.

On the other hand, Max could see that Duncan had not entirely evaded time either, as evidenced by the crow feet that were creeping at the edges of his eyes. He might have aged less dramatically than Max, but neither was immune to gravity and stress. As they sat together in Duncan's outrageously priced accommodation, something else occurred to Max: Duncan had grown heavier. Not physically heavier, but heavier in less identifiable ways, as though he'd swallowed a gold bar that now sat in his belly like a

valuable ballast. It was as if Duncan had acquired stability for the price of hauling rare cargo. Max thought about this as he listened to his friend.

Later in the evening, they waded through dance clubs and half heartedly surveyed the Saskatoon night life, but the spark that once animated their youth began to wane around one, and they were asleep by two. The following morning when they emerged from the hotel, the smell of harvest was reclaiming the streets from an abuse of perfume the night before. The lifting dew left a chill, and the solid brisk air made the city sublime between sunrise and noon.

The night before, in a maze of conversations, Max had arrived at the conclusion that Duncan's visit was a catalyst of sorts; an incentive to change course. He had a focus and purpose he hadn't felt in ages – he planned to get custody of his boys back. He would approach Rachel and have her reconsider the parenting plan. Surely she would appreciate the important influence he was on Kevin and Josh. The boys needed their dad, he told himself, and he would make it a priority to support them, even if it meant going back to the greasy oil rigs for another season.

The two men were seated across from one another in a chrome plated diner. They wore the dour faces of leaders at a failed summit. Max ordered ham and eggs and smoked a cigarette while he waited for the food to arrive. Duncan had a coffee. The restaurant radio was playing Clint Black singing about becoming a better man.

Tired looking truck drivers and women accustomed to working two jobs filled the restaurant with their hot and sour sighs. Max could smell a nauseous combination of refried oil and over-used bleach products. He could not endure another minute without a drink, so he plaintively asked the waitress to pour some Bailey's into his java, and she kindly obliged.

As he sipped on his Irish-ified coffee, he studied Duncan's face. He couldn't guess exactly what it was, but there was an aspect of Duncan's presence that reminded him of the last time he'd seen Bones; a mask disguising issues that were hard to identify. Duncan's eyes suggested that he'd stared too intensely at something he wasn't fully prepared to see, and that a glimmer of whatever he'd looked at would stay with him forever.

When the waitress arrived, she leaned over and set Max's plate in front of him, but her low cleavage was obviously for Duncan's benefit as she refilled his coffee mug to overflowing. Duncan smiled and thanked her. Then he turned to Max and asked how Bones was; it felt uncanny.

Max replied that his brother was living in Colorado Springs with a wife who barely saw him. His answer floated on the air for a moment as Duncan absorbed it. But soon his countenance lightened, and for a flickering instant, he brandished a proud and mischievous look that belied a satisfaction in solving some long savored riddle. Max was at a loss.

“Your brother certainly is a piece of work,” replied Duncan, as he added more cream to his coffee.

He started talking to Max about the topics they’d covered the night before. He reiterated to him the importance of psychologically distancing himself from Rachel, and attempting to get a handle on his alcohol abuse. He told Max to come down and crash with him in the Redwoods for awhile; dry out.

Max knew Duncan’s offer was a good one.

He felt himself succumbing to Duncan’s well-articulated suggestion that a California vacation was just what he needed. It would be more than a spa-like indulgence, he told himself; it would be an opportunity to get his life back on track. He hadn’t been to the States since college when they took trips to Syracuse and Buffalo for rock concerts and hockey games. But that was years ago, and things were different now. It was a pipedream, he thought, as he steeled himself to Duncan’s beguiling effort to capture his imagination.

When he mentioned to Duncan the impossibility of traveling to Arcata because of a DUI, Duncan countered, rather convincingly, that he knew a thing or two about getting around such complications. With a wink and a nod, Duncan informed him that sneaking across the border would be a cinch. Duncan liked to exert his considerable powers of persuasion and apply his charisma in ways that seemed to know no bounds.

He continued to press Max on his motives for moving back to Brandon. He asked him why on earth he would choose to freeze to death with Rachel and

her icy rules when he had the opportunity to go south for acceptance and redemption. He told Max that Kevin and Josh would be fine without him, as he was of no use to them in his current condition anyway.

Max said that not everyone could be an engineering professor like Duncan, gracing former friends with their presence as they traveled to various cities delivering papers and giving scholarly lectures. He explained that, unlike Duncan, he had developed feelings for others along the way; feelings that were complicated by tragic events and tangled emotions, and that this was what compelled him to move back to Brandon.

Duncan balked at Max's pathetic rationalization for remaining drunk and said he sounded like an impaired version of Rachel. He asked Max who it was, if not her, that had pushed him into his currently unsustainable position. Max bridled at Duncan's accusations and felt reluctant to say anything about his wife's motivations.

It was no secret that Duncan disliked Rachel. Her once stubborn refusal to share prescient knowledge about his fate rendered her irredeemably selfish and emotionally disturbed in his eyes. Max never knew exactly the nature of her premonition, but whatever it was; he always felt Duncan's contempt for her was in disproportion to what she could possibly be keeping from him.

There was a time when the three of them had shared an almost sibling-like bond, but after college, it was Duncan who made the choice to leave. It now

struck Max as presumptuous for Duncan to assume he could waltz back into his life and save the day. What Duncan failed to understand was that Max's deliverance lay with Rachel, and it always would⁴.

Duncan could feel Max's thoughts drift to Rachel, and he abruptly decided to take a different tack.

"We had some fun trips to the farm, didn't we?" said Duncan, in a question that landed like a statement.

"Yeah, my parents loved you. Robert loved you too. Fuck, Rachel loved you. You were so goddamn funny, and you always brought the party," said Max.

"Remember when that asshole from the local garage came over while we were having that get together with your parent's friends?" said Duncan. "He called your dad a pansy yank because your dad had dodged the draft back in the day. Remember what happened next? Do you remember how funny it was? That poor bastard shit himself when he saw Bones

⁴#6 on the Billboard Year-End Hot 100 singles of 2003.

"Unwell" by Matchbox Twenty from the album *More Than You Think You Are*. Atlantic, 2003. Another short order cook must have come on shift, thought Max, because the music suddenly changed from Country to Alt Rock over the course of the breakfast. Max put Tabasco on his eggs and listened to Rob Thomas describe his symptoms. He liked to think he could stand the high ground when it came to Rachel. He knew he'd gone out roaming but now he was ready to come home to her. He knew he was sick but it was time to get well. He'd find the appeal that would reach her heart and get him his boys back. It felt like there wasn't a longer distance in the world than the miles that stretched from where he was to the place he needed to be.

walk out from the breeze way and come down to the fire.”

“Yes, I remember. That was Bones for you.”

“I know your parents didn’t approve of your brother’s choices, but you have to admit, even they laughed hard at that one. I mean the irony. In full dress uniform, with the fucking beret and all,” said Duncan, as he was overcome by a satisfying fit of laughter at recounting the memory.

“So Duncan, it’s been great to see you again after so many years,” redirected Max, “Your visit has been good for me. I feel like I’ve been able to let go of some things. It seems better between us. I hope we can stay in contact; you know what I mean? But right now I better get you over to the airport.”

Max wanted to emphasize the finality of their reunion and place things back in a practical perspective, but Duncan wasn’t buying it.

“You’re going to see her again aren’t you?” he said.

“Yeah, I am,” said Max, “Your visit has reminded me about what’s important.”

“Which is what, exactly?” said Duncan.

“Kevin and Josh,” said Max.

Duncan pressed him with a skeptical stare.

“I don’t know, maybe Rachel too,” he said.

“You have my email and my phone number,” said Duncan, with an edge of frustration. “Think about my offer, and do something about taking your goddamn life back.”

Max was looking out the window. “I know what I’m doing, Duncan, but thanks anyway,” he said. His booze pickled reasoning had already moved on to other matters.

After he dropped off Duncan at the airport, he would grab a six pack and a cheese burger and head back to the farm. He’d convinced his mom he was attending a job interview for a company that had offices in Saskatoon and Red Deer. He’d tell her the interview went well and that he was hopeful.

He wouldn’t mention Duncan. He’d never mention Duncan.

2004

-Spring-

“Lean back, cause this shit is bad ass.”

Duncan cavalierly named it, ‘the powder,’ because that’s what it was - powder. It had the consistency of baking flour coupled with a plutonium-like weight. Its coloring was rust, like turmeric crossed with cayenne. After the first harvest, he and Pierre marveled at the mounds of it piled high on the basement work station. Duncan thought it looked like a diorama of Tatooine. He started talking about Landspeeders and Sandpeople.

Then he thought of *Dune*.

He wanted an epic name, something suggesting the sprawl of space and the reach of stars. He thought nothing would be better than a reference to Frank Herbert’s *Melange*? For a time, he was completely convinced that the powder should become known as ‘the spice.’ But Pierre wasn’t of the same mind, he said the stuff needed a pharmaceutical sounding name, something that would lend credibility to their discovery.

Pierre was persnickety, and he insisted on being personally in charge of reducing the seeds to powder. He employed a sturdy and venerable Cuisinart grinder to get the job done. He was painstakingly careful and

scientific about each gram of powder. One afternoon, however, in distraction or haste, the lid flew off the grinder and the spice went everywhere, including all over himself.

“Fuck,” he said in frustrated French.

Duncan thought it was funny. “Dude, you look like you’re covered in cinnamon.”

“Insinniom? What’s insinniom?” The stuff was obviously in his ears.

“Not ‘Insinniom,’ ‘in cinnamon,’” said Duncan.

They stared at each other and then began to laugh.

They tinkered with the spelling and soon the name rolled off the tongue: INSYNNIUM; aka powder or spice.

Duncan and Pierre worked on the dosage for many weeks to calibrate the stuff to an amount that would reveal its promise. It was eventually established that one capsule of powder consistently gave the user a great night’s sleep. Depending on the dosage, however, the dreams would vary. One capsule, for example, would provide memorable dreams, while two capsules could push the dreamer toward more intense recollections of their past. But it was the three capsule maximum that forcefully gave the user a vivid flashback into their life.

The two men discovered that using more than three capsules within a twenty-four-hour time frame conferred no additional psychotropic benefit. They’d heard of individual’s swallowing up to ten capsules in a day, but those over indulgent folks were generally found sticking a finger down their throat or pissing

green, not the added effect they were searching for. It was as if the brain attained a sweet-spot with the three capsule ceiling, a sort of dream equilibrium. Users found they could easily scale back the dosage or go off the spice completely. It was commonly acknowledged that Insynnium was NOT addictive.

The powder appeared to hyper activate neurons in the frontal and occipital lobes responsible for causing extreme regression into the minutia of retained thought. It enabled users to have fantastic dreams, furnished with previously forgotten or inaccessible memories, all wrapped up in a parcel of rest and rejuvenation. A typical experience with Insynnium consisted of an individual probing, in a heightened fashion, those impressions from their past typically unavailable through ordinary mental processes. Upon ingestion of the powder, dormant areas of stored memory were reanimated in combination with all of one's accessible reflections. The whole effect produced a delicious and combustible explosion of sensory stimuli while the user slept in a deep REM state.

The only side effects from Insynnium appeared to be satisfied and chilled out individuals who were neither desperate nor dependent.

Until Max's coma, that was.

Duncan sat in Jesus' Pizza – by his reckoning, the best restaurant in Arcata⁵. He was thinking about where Insynnium might be headed, and was stumped for a clue concerning any destination at all.

The hands on the clock moved past eight.

Before Max had his coma, Duncan was only weeks away from sitting down with Mr. Enderby to discuss an intriguing business prospect. He was eager to plug his spice into Enderby's well established network of users, dealers, and promoters. It would be the distribution component of Duncan's aggressive strategy to ensure that Insynnium got expanded to the four corners of America.

Before he made another move, however, he needed to figure out why Max had reacted to the

⁵#10 on the billboard Year-End Hot 100 singles of 2004. **“Lean Back”** by Terror Squad featuring Fat Joe and Remy from the album *True Story*. Universal Records, 2004. That was what Duncan loved about Jesus' Pizza Parlor, the Hip hop. Duncan liked it all; the soul, the R&B, the Rap, the Funk, and the What the Fuck. He was in Jesus' settled beside Monty and yelling at Jim; the typical visit. He could hear Jim exit at the back of the restaurant and go out into the night with el dente pasta and Chianti for the bums' who slept in the alley by the dumpster. Duncan's eyes were closed as he scratched at the hairball next to him. He asked himself if he'd done the right thing by bringing Max to Arcata to dry out. As soon as Terror Squad came on 105.1 Duncan suddenly thought fuck, fuck, fuck, I've lit dynamite and glued my hands to the stick. He wondered what he was thinking when he let Max try Insynnium. He decided he must have been thinking about Grace.

powder in such a bizarre fashion. Resolving Max's spice related health concerns was paramount to his ambition to push Insynnium into the mainstream. He knew that one day the spice would have its tentacles spread around the globe, and that repeat users would be users that were neither in comas nor dangling from the edge of insanity.

As he sat there in Jesus' sipping stout and eating anchovies on toast, he thought of Max, out pounding his brittle knees on a five-mile run. He couldn't help but chuckle over Max's new devotion to health and fitness. To see him so diligently improving his body was a pleasant contrast to the cringe-worthy slob who had arrived in Arcata nearly three months before.

Max started out with jogging, and then he progressed to yoga, and before long he was cooking meals for himself. Over the course of the last twenty days, however, he had intensified his health regime yet again. His additional repetitions of burpees and pull-ups - not to mention his staggering intake of kale and Quinoa - were all in an effort to precipitate another 'event.' He was under the impression that his improved conditioning and lower cholesterol would trigger another coma-like reaction to Insynnium.

Duncan frequently reminded him that a coma was no trifling matter and that the last thing he needed was a dead friend on his conscience, something Max appeared to have trouble appreciating. He informed Duncan that he would not only wake up from his next coma - surely bound to occur - but that he would bring back evidence to prove he wasn't crazy.

What was he going to do, thought Duncan, come back in a DeLorean?

Max's story about time traveling back to his childhood seemed utterly preposterous to Duncan, and just marginally less so for Pierre. Granted, Max was in a brief and unexplained coma, but he was in Duncan's presence and under Pierre's care the entire time he was unconscious. He went nowhere. On the face of things, the claims were sad and ridiculous, but they pointed to a deeper problem that was more unsettling. Pierre mentioned to Duncan that Max was likely suffering from the delayed symptoms of a nervous breakdown; and now, perhaps due to *Insynnium*, a completely fractured psyche.

Duncan wondered how he would ever explain such a thing to Grace.

* * *

He had the best of intentions for Maximilian when he brought him to Arcata in the winter.

Following his visit to Saskatoon in the fall, Duncan couldn't say he was surprised when he eventually received Max's request for help. The collision course he was on seemed rather obvious to anyone who cared to notice. His naive appeal to Rachel had backfired miserably, and his last email to Duncan was nothing short of a plea for intervention.

Following the receipt of Max's existential SOS, Duncan jumped into his Gran Sport and drove all the way to Nipawin in a single sweep. Thirty-five hours after leaving Arcata he came to a coasting stop on

rural Saskatchewan gravel with snowflakes collecting on the windshield. He'd explained to Max how things would go down, and Max had agreed to follow directions, no questions.

He crept the car ahead with the engine idling and the headlights beaming forward through the night. When Max came into view, he was standing at the crossroads shivering in the wind. His face had a pallor that was coterminous with death, and Duncan could see the whisper of disease sidled up beside him. Max jumped in the passenger door and immediately basked in the warmth of the Buick's heater, his only possessions were the clothes on his back along with his wallet and phone.

After a few days, they were back in Arcata.

Duncan gave Max free range around the house and showed him how to navigate the town. But it was soon apparent that Max needed to be corralled. His rye infused personality was drawing attention to Duncan and Pierre in ways the two men had trouble appreciating. It made Duncan particularly uneasy to see Max day after day in such an alcohol marooned condition. He had no self-control, and many of his social filters had simply slipped away.

Duncan also speculated that his friend's liver had to be approaching the size of a football, and likely harboring the inconspicuous yet certain probability of cirrhosis. He knew he had to get Max off the Canadian Club ASAP. So, he took him to see the only person capable of assisting in such a feat under limited time constraints; a local Nepalese hypnotist

who practiced something called, ‘irreversible aversion.’ After two sessions of hypnosis and a touch of yak butter tea, Max’s liquor consumption dwindled to a halt.

Once the addiction had been cured, Max started to reemerge, and Duncan began recognizing remnants of the guy he’d once known so well. As the days crawled into weeks, it felt like the two of them were back in Kingston again, ruminating on good weed in the ambience of a college town. Duncan brought out some old snap shots that he’d taken at a pub back in Peterborough during their second year at Queens; there was also one from a house party in Cornwall, and, of course, numerous pictures from the farm. As he reminisced with Max about road trips and missed opportunities, the topic of *Insynnium* came up.

The stuff was circulating freely around Humboldt County and Max had been given a handful by someone. He’d heard that the innocuous looking substance could alter everything associated with a standard dream. He’d heard that the powder stimulated memories in a fashion one could not imagine. He also heard that when users awoke they felt rested and more alive than they’d been in ages.

Max asked Duncan if this was true.

He said it was.

Max asked Duncan if he’d tried it.

He said that he had.

Duncan told Max a standard and well-fabricated story about the origins of the spice; it was imperative that Max, like everyone else, know nothing of

Duncan's involvement. It was a mercurial narrative with a shadowy cast of foreign figures involving modes of manufacturing and distribution vaguely located around the world. There were also personal intrigues and haphazard connections surrounding the drug's migration to the West Coast, or so the story went.

Duncan mentioned some truths about the drug as well. For example, he said that Insynnium became molecularly invisible when contacted by blood, therefore completely untraceable in the human system. He said that even forensic toxicologists couldn't attest to who had ingested the stuff. As the story unfolded, he and Max were as high as they could get on a rare strain of cannabis known as, 'Grand Propulsion' - a potently bred grade of marijuana that came from a basement in Chicago.

Although Max's curiosity about Insynnium had been peaked, Duncan remained ambivalent about his friend trying the stuff. In the end, it was a discussion with Pierre that convinced him to let Max give it a go. Pierre thought that Insynnium might assist Max in working out his unconscious entanglements with the past and clarifying his future. It didn't seem unreasonable or irresponsible for them to encourage Max to swallow a capsule or two. By the looks of the bags under his eyes, thought Duncan, a deep and restorative rest was something that Max, at the very least, could certainly do with.

His first encounter with Insynnium left him floored. Like others before him, Max couldn't believe

what he'd seen, not to mention the mental and physical restoration he felt afterward. Following his first two ingestions of the drug, he became visibly changed. His eyes became brighter, and his hair became lighter, and he spoke enthusiastically about the clarity of his regressions and the astonishing relaxation of his sleep. Duncan smiled at his exuberance; he too, had learned long ago the value of a good nights rest.

On March 1, 2004, Max took three capsules of Insynnium and quickly went to sleep. Duncan and Pierre paid little attention to the swiftness and depth of his slumber; they simply left him to rest peacefully in Aloysius's old quarters, a spacious bedroom at the back of the house that was slowly, and by default, becoming Max's.

In the morning, when he failed to show up for breakfast, Duncan went to check on him. When he saw Max lying morbidly still under the comforter, the ghastly thought occurred that his friend was dead. He moved in close and placed the back of his hand against Max's skin; it was tacky and pasty and matte-finish white, but still warm. He grabbed Max by his shoulders and shook him, but it was like seizing the attention of an incubating jellyfish. He shouted his name, but there was no sign of response. He grabbed his wrists and listened, and that's when he felt the diminished pulse of hibernating vitality. Though Max's breath was faint to the point of extinguishing, he was still alive.

At Duncan's request, Pierre, a medical doctor by training, came back to the house from his offices at the university. Together the two men observed and languished over Max the entire day. On more than one occasion the two considered taking him to the Mad River clinic for care; but care for what, they asked themselves, overdosing on an untraceable drug they secretly planned to interface with the U.S. population?

It was medically clear to Pierre that Max had fallen into a coma, and that he was absolutely unrevivable. After twenty-four hours of indecision and nervous anxiety, Duncan finally made the choice to load Max into his car and deliver him to the hospital. The plan was to quietly dump him at the emergency entrance and let the doctors on shift worry about his prognosis.

As the two men carried him by his arms and legs over the threshold of the house, he began to groan and wrestle with their grapple. They plunked him on the sofa and watched with avid fixation as he reanimated. His face was the picture of someone in utter confusion, while at the same time pressed with a Vesuvius-like need to speak. He manically attempted to describe the nature of the dream from which he'd just awoken, but his mind was finding it spectacularly difficult to square matters of space and time.

He said that he'd been living in Nipawin for a year when he was eleven.

Not a single user of Insynnium had ever been knocked out like Max. He'd slept death-style for twenty-four hours, and then awoke groggy and

confused, with a story to rival *McFly's*. He had an enormous amount of concern that every detail of his life be the same as it was when he'd fallen asleep. He looked like a man who'd been held in solitary confinement for a cruel and unusual length of time. He adamantly questioned Duncan and Pierre about the events of the past year and the health of his children and the state of the union and so on and so forth. It took almost three hours to settle him down.

"Come on Max, pull it together, you haven't altered time or changed anything here in the present. You've been in a coma for twenty-four hours, and that's significant, but you haven't gone anywhere, I can assure you of that," said Duncan.

"But I felt like I time travelled," said Max, "No, damn it, I know I time travelled. I was living on the farm just as sure as I'm sitting here right now."

His agitated and confused sensibilities were only made worse by Duncan's grinning failure to take the claims seriously. Although, in actual fairness, it was raw nerves rather than disbelieving humor that accounted for Duncan's giddy disposition - mostly the product of the relief he was experiencing at Max's physical revival.

"So nobody else has had this happen with Insynnium?" said Max.

"If they have, I've never heard of it. I mean, I don't know much about the drug," lied Duncan, "But I've spoken with a lot of people about it, you know, trying to understand it more, and no one has ever mentioned a reaction like this."

“Maybe you’re confusing dream intensity with time travel, no?” said Pierre, well aware that the question was a mistake long before it breached his lips.

“Look, Professor, I know it’s impossible for you to grasp, but I was in 1984 for a long fucking time,” said Max in a heated voice that was running at a frenetic pace. “It was an entire year, and it was just as real as I’m talking to you two assholes right now.”

Duncan knew that Max was still fragile from his bouts of dipsomania and the abandonment of his children, and so he asked himself if he should’ve known better than to encourage him to try Insynnium. Pierre, on the other hand, showed less responsibility. He reminded Duncan about individuals with problems far worse than Max and how the spice had undoubtably helped them. There were war wounded vets, drug addicts, and hyperstressed professors trying to halt their decaying minds and they’d been eating the spice like Jolly Ranchers at a Canada Day parade. Pierre said there was no way they could have predicted Max would suffer such unforeseeable complications in relation to the spice.

Following his recuperation from the coma, it slowly became evident that Max was mulling over novel and fantastic possibilities in his head, and so it was that he informed Duncan about his desire to try the spice again.

A panic gripped Duncan’s chest, and his initial inclination was to discourage Max from taking more Insynnium. The idea also floated through his head to give Max a placebo as a way of indirectly denying

another coma. But who was he fooling? The spice had already been released into public circulation. If Max actively wanted to get his hands on the stuff, he would do it, regardless of Duncan's attempts to get around it. So the choice was made to let him try it again, but at the house, as it was preferable to an alley or the backseat of a junkyard car. There would also be some specific and formal controls to try and figure out what was going on.

* * *

Outside, the day was growing dim, and the street lamps were beginning to scatter their artificial light. Duncan shouted at Jim in the back of the restaurant to let him know he was leaving as he pushed through the door and walked out into the night. He knew by the time he reached the house that Pierre would have Max wired up for another attempt at a comatose state. It made him sick to his stomach to think about it.

Pierre got Max's permission to hook him up to a brainwave device, as well as other pieces of sleep assessment equipment. He told Max that the monitors were in place in case of another coma and for the purposes of learning whether he was inflicting irreparable harm on his brain. Unfortunately, the scientific atmosphere of the entire investigation gave Max the dubious impression that they were legitimizing his time travel account. Feeling vindicated, though, Max agreed to keep everything on the Q.T.

Pierre was confident that the time traveling claims were nothing more than Max's overactive imagination in combination with the mind blowing clarity of the drug's regressive sequences. Both he and Duncan were troubled, however, by Max's bizarre coma. They asked themselves what would cause such an extended period of unconsciousness. Everyone else who'd taken Insynnium was arouse-able with a good shake. Max, on the other hand, could not be retrieved from the depths of his sleep by any means.

And he wasn't reacting normally to Insynnium in other ways, either. For example, twenty days had passed, and he was still showing no susceptibility to the spice. He had been taking three capsules every night, but nothing was happening, and Duncan had no decent answers. When he grew restless and agitated, Duncan began appeasing his friend's impatience by inventing facts.

Duncan told him that he needed to prioritize exercise, particularly running, and eat plenty of leafy green vegetables, as this was a method known to enhance the effects of Insynnium. It was all lies, of course, but Duncan was banking on the chance that Max's improved blood pressure and hyper-oxygenated existence would naturally straighten out his mind and put an end to the entire affair.

He took heart in the possibility that Max might never again suffer from a coma while using Insynnium. It would be an outcome in the best interests of everyone, especially Duncan, who needed to put the unfortunate chapter behind him and refocus

his entrepreneurial ambitions on the spice – a substance that seemed to have an expansion plan of its own.

1984

AUE

*“I roll with the punches to feel what’s
real, and I jump”*

It had been two hundred and forty days, and Max was still caught off guard by the sound of his voice, his diminutive hands, and the unnerving duration of the drug’s effect. Every day he wanted to believe that Insynnium was diminishing in his system, molecule by molecule he imagined it evaporating from his blood stream – it was the only thought that brought him hope in a world where much else left him with a sense of dread.

He was sitting on a milking stool in the hay loft of the hip-roofed barn. He fiddled with a Rubik’s Cube in the diminishing daylight, but the running colors of the three-dimensional puzzle couldn’t effectively distract him, no matter how hard he tried to get his head around its logic.

When he arrived at the farm in 1984, he was startled and captivated on a scale he could never have imagined. At first, he wondered how long he could contain himself before he began blurting out random pieces of information that lied far in the future. How long until he started telling childhood friends detailed

stories about the coming decades. He planned to shock everyone with ideas and explanations that used articulate sentences improbably contained within the mind of a child. But none of these things happened, exactly. In fact, he said very little about anything. He often climbed into the cavernous loft to sit among the cats and the pigeons. It was a challenge to stay calm in the face of the central question to which his existence had been distilled - the question as to whether he would ever wake up.

He found himself paralyzed between acting too radically on one hand, and fear of not acting radically enough on the other. He was convinced that his predicament was an example of any number of time travel movies he'd seen; scenarios where changing past events completely altered the future in terrible and unforeseen ways. In point of fact, he spent most of his hours anxious and paranoid about the possible damage he'd already inflicted on a future for which those around him had little conception.

* * *

Nine months ago, he awoke in the house of his childhood and became instantly aware that the flesh he embodied was no longer that of a thirty-one-year-old man, but rather that of a young boy, his previous self. His brain shorted out on several circuits from the unbelievable reality of what he was observing.

And what he observed that first morning, as he rolled out of bed with trepid anticipation, was overwhelming evidence of a former life faithfully

reacquired down to the minutiae. He was instantly convinced that the effects of Insynnium had been woefully understated. He'd tried the drug before at a lower dose, but the three capsules he swallowed were obviously a threshold of sorts; and to be fair, Duncan had told him as much. But neither Duncan nor Pierre had mentioned time travel or the possibility of finding oneself at the theoretical limits of quantum mechanics.

He did not even try to achieve emotional composure as he ran to the bathroom to relieve himself. His small, nimble fingers fumbled with his tiny penis, but soon he was laughing as he whizzed, and marveling at his reacquired proportions. He was a prepubescent child still un-oppressed by the curses of the glands. He finished releasing his stream into the toilet and eyeballed the rest of his exposed flesh.

In the light of the bathroom, under the revealing incandescence of several stark bulbs, he gazed upon himself with the attention of a dermatologist. He ran his hands over the goose bumps on his arms and marveled at the quality of his skin surface, so lean and clear. He was overcome by his hairless, whiskerless, tattoo-less appearance. He smelled the palms of his hands and stuck his nose into his armpit. Not a single pore had yet been corrupted by the sourness of adolescence. He felt empty of weight and full of springing vitality. In almost every conceivable way he was reminded of the extent to which he'd forgotten himself.

When he looked into the moist and tooth particulate speckled mirror above the sink, his mind

began racing down alternating tracks between dumbfounded amazement and heart arresting panic. He was totally seized by the extent and influence of the mind altering spice that he'd ingested. His eyes reflected back at him with a clear and contact-less acuity, despite the pasty glimmer of nausea he could feel flickering in his stomach.

He was startled out of his looking-glass trance when his father's voice began shouting through the bathroom door.

"For Christ sakes, Max, hurry up, you're going to miss the bus," said Glenn.

Glenn had a strident and unflappable manner, but his words were often stained at their fringes, as though his syllables were at risk of crumbling from the unpredictable weight of raising two boys.

His dad's voice, so long unheard, reverberated in Max's ears and caused him to almost unhinge the door as he tore it open. He peered deep and directly into his father's eyes with a look of fascination and disbelief.

"Jesus, Max, easy with the door," said Glenn, "Is everything okay, are you alright?"

His father's frustration morphed into puzzlement, and then into a look of mild concern.

"Yeah I'm fine, Dad," replied Max, through a wonderstruck falsetto that he momentarily confused with that of a preteen girl speaking on his behalf.

But Max was far from fine, and even a further distance from okay. He was wholly overwhelmed by his transformed existence and the reality co-opting effects of whatever he'd swallowed moments earlier.

His entire sense of linear time had collapsed and folded back on itself in ways that he couldn't competently assimilate.

The chance to see his father again was so exquisite and magical that he simply grabbed his dad around the waist and hugged him for all he was worth. His face pushed into his father's belly and he could sense paternal warmth go into his core. Max had, on occasion, half-religiously contemplated a reunion with his dad in the afterlife, but no quantity of imagination or abundance of belief could account for the present phenomenon. As he allowed his father's energy to enfold him, he felt himself become a small dependent child again. Tears welled in his eyes, and he asked himself how it was that he had entered such a destabilizing vortex.

His eyes had played tricks on him before, and he was aware that his vision could be fooled by the convincing drug. But it was his sense of smell that effectively extinguished all doubt about where in fact he was. The air he inhaled held the unmistakable sandalwood scent of his father, the caffeinated aroma of percolating Folgers, and the olfactory residue of his mom's incense that hid behind paintings and circulated under upholstery.

The McVista house was alive and irresistibly tactile. In many ways, it seemed to Max that his entire life had been a dream, and it was only now that he was finally awake. He felt the reassuring pressure of his father's hands as they rested on his back offering comfort to a rapid pulse. He thought about the weight

of a parent's touch and the small unacknowledged moments of youth that evaporate from memory.

He let go of his dad in a childish squirm, and with discombobulated senses ran to his bedroom to seize hold of his faculties in a weak and dysfunctional grasp. He leaned his back against the door and wondered how long the day would last.

"Come get your eggs, Max, they're getting cold," said his mom, in a voice that was soft and fresh, and not yet injured by loss.

He bounded down the stairs wearing a miniature collared shirt and a sweater that he couldn't believe reached his wrists. His jeans were of an equally diminished size, hand-me-down raiments from neighbor families who stored their cotton and denim in closets with mothballs.

He entered the kitchen and found the place stoked with wood heat and a kettle whistling on the range. When his mother emerged from the pantry, he was unprepared for the impact of her presence. Although he'd eaten dinner with her on the night he vanished, it had been ages since he'd looked upon her in such a state of youth. Her beauty was unstressed, and her face was wide with kindness. He felt several emotions teetering precariously all at once, and his eyes began to fill with tears again.

"Your dad says you're upset, what's going on?"

"It's nothing, Mom. I'll be fine."

He could tell that she didn't believe him.

He sat at the kitchen table – aged oak under varnish with knots like bull's-eyes – and tried to

mentally arrest his slide into the oblivion of yesteryear. His entire sensorium was completely tweaked by the inexorable thrust of his new dimension which came at him with the startling declivity of an avalanche.

"Max, grab your shit and let's go!" commanded Robert, as he recklessly wound through the kitchen.

"Bones, please, the language. You're brother's not feeling well," said Grace, as Robert disappeared into the boot-room.

"I'm just saying, if we don't move our asses, Jake's gonna lay on the horn and make us look like a couple of dorks," shouted Robert, as he rummaged for something in the breezeway.

He soon returned to the kitchen and approached the table. He brought his face close to Max's and gave him a silent appraisal; it was a swift assessment, but enough for him to gain assurance that whatever was bothering his brother would soon pass.

"Let's go, Bro," he said in a whispered and convincing tone.

The two boys sprinted down the driveway to the gravel road just as a mud encrusted yellow bus pulled up in the spring slush. Max's heart was pounding in his throat, but his weightless legs could have carried him across the Serengeti. He wanted to scream at the highest ranges of his breath in an attempt to wake himself up, but he intuitively knew that any outburst would be futile and that there was no easy exit from the abyss he'd fallen into.

The retro-slang banter on the school bus would have been comical for anyone, but for Max - as an

adult camouflaged in the body of a child - the effect was particularly profound. He sat silently for a few moments with a stupid grin smeared across his face, afraid to open his mouth for fear of revealing his true age or speaking in a baritone grumble.

It didn't take long, however, for his childhood friend, Keith, to start pumping him for information and soliciting opinions regarding matters of which he retained only the dimmest recollection. Keith wanted to know which movie they'd recently seen together was better: *The Karate Kid* or *Ghostbusters*. What about sneaking into *Beverly Hills Cop* or maybe *A Nightmare on Elm Street*? Did he watch *The Fall Guy* last night? Had he heard about the new joystick for the *Commodore 64*? Max had no choice; he soon found himself answering with a meager supply of faded factoids. He found the courage to embrace his renewed youth and began contributing to the highs and lows of the multiple conversations seamlessly taking place as the bus made its way into town in a series of stops and starts.

It wasn't long before he found himself adrift in a sea-sickening classroom. His cramped wooden desk, defaced by generations of vandalizing sixth graders, floated underneath him like a miniature galleon encrusted with barnacles of chewing gum. The sounds and sensations of Crestview Elementary became fatally real as waves of arithmetic handouts floated through the room like flotsam and jetsam.

Mr. McFadden surveyed the class with the ridiculous absent minded gaze of a man high on his

own thoughts. Max's adult mind was given to understand that the teacher was probably contemplating whether to plant barley or oats in his fallow fields, rather than the correct positioning of any particular student's decimal point.

Max wondered what the amassment of hours or the passing of time in 1984 now represented in 2004 as he continued to mull over the morning's events bouncing around in his head.

"Staring out the window will not bring recess any faster, Mr. McVista. What is it you're working on, anyway?"

McFadden walked up to Max's desk and looked down with an appalled expression at the lack of academic diligence. Max had managed to convert very few fractions into anything other than doodles. He was mostly just staring at his classmates and the budding trees at the edges of the playground.

"Very disappointing, Maximilian; you need to get through these fractions by recess, or you'll be remaining inside. Do you understand what you're doing?" prodded the one part pedagogue, two part farmer, with only a passing concern for Max's scholastic promise.

"Yes," replied Max.

He wanted to be the class smart ass and crack wise on it all. Mentally he was almost the same age as his teacher, so who was McFadden to tell him what to do? The emotional toll of the drug, however, continued to absorb every ounce of his oxygen. The situation was not unlike being trapped beneath a barbell, and he

failed to exert anything other than acquiescence to the teacher's pressing authority.

His timid reticence, however, wasn't to last long. After a fortnight of adjustments to his astronomically altered circumstances, he began taking small and vane delights in his time advantaged position. He soon landed squarely in the principal's office for supplying his male classmates' with *Ludacris* gangsta talk and a hip-hop vernacular that spread like measles in the boy's room. He also took historical liberty by editorializing on a mundane lesson in current affairs class.

The social studies teacher, Mr. Kellogg, was discussing the arms buildup and the specter of nuclear annihilation in a lesson designed to help understand news coverage. Students were offering ideas and comments to spark discussion, but the opinions were tepid and mind numbingly jejune. Max attempted to enliven the situation by stating that Reagan was a war monger who would outspend the Soviet Union on medium and long range intercontinental ballistic missiles. He added that by 1989 the Berlin wall would be crumbling under the sledgehammers of bankrupt East Germans. He used the words, 'Perestroika,' 'Glasnost,' and 'Gorbachev,' all in one elaborate sentence. He also took a certain relish in belittling the fickle theory of trickle down economics.

Mr. Kellogg, a member of the Saskatchewan Progressive Conservative Party, responded that Max's contribution to the Cold War debate had been speculative at best and plain 'asinine' at worst – a

word that's vague definition among his classmates precipitated resounding laughter. Max's attempt to be mentally impressive came off rather weak. His expansive rhetorical ambitions shriveled as he confronted the incomprehensible distance between himself and the other eleven-year-old children who now considered him freakishly disabled thanks to his precocious insights and over-the-top political ramblings.

He became acutely sensitive to the delicate time trap he was mired in. He changed his free wheeling stance and converted to the cautious discipline of following a behavioral pattern that was consistent with his original life script. Even innocuous references to minor events, he theorized, could place him in dire risk of altering the fragile space/ time continuum – and Robert Zemeckis hadn't even released *Back to the Future* yet.

He had no idea what dimension he'd entered, or if he'd ever escape from the hole he'd fallen into, but he knew he'd never be able to forgive himself if he re-emerged in 2004 and found it even more fucked up than the version he'd left, all on account of his unwillingness to take precaution with the words that came out of his mouth. He was convinced there had to be a Chinese proverb forbidding such a cosmic faux pas.

In addition to all this, Max began to feel distinctly uncomfortable when his adult mind concluded that there was no angle or lighting arrangement from

which his mother did not look blazingly attractive. He wondered how it was that he hadn't noticed this before. He also thought about how his life might have been different had he received slightly more of his mother's genetic material. Not that his father was any slouch, but his mom was in a category separate from most others.

"What's for dinner?" said Glenn.

"Max helped me make samosas and red lentil masala with spinach," said Grace. "Isn't that impressive?"

It was a simple Indian dish, but it spoke volumes about Grace's culinary dexterity and indelible curiosity. She started making the spicy entrées after taking a cooking class focused on Central Asian cuisine.

The course was taught by a husband and wife; Sikh refugees that the Canadian government had resettled in Nipawin as part of a visa requirement to assimilate displaced persons. Apparently, the Department of Immigration thought it would be 'multicultural' to stick an Amritsar family in the middle of a town noted for its Northern Pike Festival.

The man wore a turban, and in those years, that was as memorable as anything that ever came to those parts. The couple opened a marvelous restaurant that over a short period of time ended up being frequented by most of the locals. The acquisition of the Punjabi taste proved remarkably tenacious; so much so, that a cooking class was organized at the local Knights of Columbus hall where it gained rapid popularity.

“I made the papadams and the peppermint sauce,” said Max.

Grace and Glenn looked proudly at their son.

He could see that his true age and unbounded dimensions were as hidden from his parents as the concept of mitochondria from a cow.

He fumbled his way around the messy kitchen, passing his mom sifters and spatulas as she fussed over the curry leaves and the ghee. He asked her questions to which he faintly remembered the answers from years before, but each reply she offered was now magnified into a breathtaking sweep of understanding.

He was particularly captivated by the poignancy of magnificent memories grown dim, such as the rumpus room volatility of his father’s almost pathological enthusiasm for the Edmonton Oilers during NHL playoffs. Goals and, more importantly, near goals, caused his father to leap off the Chesterfield with fan inspired agility as balletic as a Gretzky replay. Being a part of such relived moments made him feel that his innocence had been handed back to him and his sense of wonder restored.

Sadly, however, moments of such regressive childhood purity were rare. It was more often the case that he found his thirty-one year-old brain aching with the knowledge of events that hadn’t taken place yet. It was distressing to know the lives and fates of the children that he chased around the playground, lives and fates he had been gratefully ignorant of the first time through.

There was a girl called, 'Fat Louise.' A child picked on because of her clumsy weight and poorly fitted clothes. A girl whose struggles were not illuminated by the light of facts until later in life: a cruelly abused orphan, a foster child, a victim of accidental disfigurement at the hands of a careless guardian. Her limping shuffle and early death made it difficult for Max to make eye contact when they passed in the hallway or stood next to one another by the school's rusting swing set. It pained him to understand the anguish that filled her days, while his - even on a second tour - moved ahead in a fortunate and comfortable rhythm. He wasn't a child in truth, and he hated himself for his lack of courage every time he saw her standing alone in her troubled solitude.

Knowing the present conditions and ultimate eventualities of the children that surrounded him was crippling. Some of their fates had already played out by 2004. It was less than a year ago that he attended Teddy Rigby's funeral, and he thought about that as he watched Teddy running with the others. And then there was Margaret Duchamp, who lost two of her children in a trailer fire; the list went on - divorces, brain injuries, cancer, you name it. There was also happiness for many, but that remained harder to appreciate among the tragedies.

Not only was Max emotionally unprepared for time travel, but his lagging physical development took a toll as well. He had never learned how to fight or mastered a rudimentary technique of self-defense in

his life. But in spite of this, his adult mind told him that he could easily kick the ass of any little coeval he pleased. To his chagrin, though, he discovered many of them to be as tough as stevedores in a Boston Harbor brawl, and he was reluctantly forced to come to terms with an unsettling new relativity about his size and his competency in a fight.

In May, a chain link fence was erected between the high school and Crestview Elementary in a dubious attempt to keep the younger children from entering the 'sphere of influence and intimidation' that the older grades presented. It seemed to Max that the school board was trying to achieve the unachievable. And of course, he was proven correct on more occasions than staff cared to admit.

Older boys would inevitably scale the fence and torment the younger ones. Generally, this consisted of a gang of Neanderthal bullies slinging threats at the timid and the meek with the sadistic intent of scaring them out of their britches. Other times, student contact would be displayed through greater physical aggression, such as a spontaneous and lopsided sports competition in which the smaller and less hormonally endowed would be flattened. Once in a while, however, the interactions would be decidedly pugilistic and manifest themselves in an outright fist fight. But, for this, Max had a protector.

Robert was a head banger. He wore a faded denim vest over a black leather jacket, and even in the winter he pulled on *Black Sabbath* and *Iron Maiden* t-shirts.

He tucked his acid wash jeans into his Reebok high tops and sported a mullet and a wallet chain.

During recesses and lunch hours, Robert and his buddies smoked cigarettes behind the skate shack.⁶ Max knew that they toked on weed and drank Old Milwaukee out there as well. But sensitive information like that always remained encased in the walls of his skull in an attempt to be a part of Robert's dangerous and brazen fraternity.

Though Robert never made a show of it, he was always looking out for his little brother.

One day at recess, when the usual remedial suspects from Hope-La-Rouge High School came over the fence and began confronting Max and his friends with their atavistic displays, Max took exception to their threats and fired back a caustic and biting put down.

⁶#6 on the Billboard Year-End Hot 100 singles of 1984. "**Jump**" by Van Halen from the album *1984*. Warner Bros, 1983. For Max this was Robert's song because his brother's life seemed to be in its wake. Bones was a rural cut version of Diamond Dave, especially the karate kicks and the high flair, even if his hair was all Eddie's. The song roared against the backdrop of every day, over played on ghetto blasters and radio stations from Prince Rupert to Swift Current. Robert was a boy again and Max saw his brother just as he remembered him, before the house of pain, before grenades and serrated blades, before close quarter executions, before the life of the quiet professional. His brother was still mischievous and free, and not yet the dark figure trading arms along the Somalian shore, stamped with the lasting imprint of war.

A thirty-one-year-old man could be counted on to send some pretty humiliating invective in the direction of a grade ten bully. The boys all laughed, including the ones accompanying the ringleader. But Max knew the fleeting seconds between the levity of his bold comments and the physical reply were merely a pyrrhic victory. He received a vicious blow to his solar plexus, a blow that came with such force that it dropped him to the patches on his knees.

Robert saw the punch, and ran over from the skate shack like some drill sergeant with a big can of whoop-ass. He was thirteen, and most of the bullies were at least two years his senior. The only thing Robert did better than throw a punch, however, was take one. He fought vigorously with the older boys, and he came out on top.

It wasn't pretty; it was repetitive blunt force trauma. It was bruised meat, swollen lips, and bitten knuckles. It was skeletal damage that showed up as marks on the forehead and dents under the eyes. There wasn't much blood but there were plenty of injuries lurking under shirts and in the crotches of pants, and aches that would last for days. The older boys were physically hurt, and though it went unspoken, everyone knew they wouldn't return. There might be other boys, on other days, but not these ones, they were finished, schooled.

Max felt pride, even as a man, when he and his friends, along with Robert and his, walked across the playfield and back into the school. Max entered his classroom victorious, but not before glancing across

the hall to see Bones go into the boy's room to scrub congealed blood from under his fingernails and clean the scratches along his neck. Bones was strong and flexible like barbed wire, a reminder that he could be stretched but shouldn't be tangled with. He possessed precious metal properties like density and impenetrability, and these weighty qualities often rubbed hard against the resistance of others; like a Spanish American milled dollar rolling around with plastic casino poker chips. Max could see once again, in Robert's lunging movements toward teen-hood, the wild and feral tendencies that would make his brother a legend in their hometown.

Robert's friends and most everyone else eventually referred to him as, 'Bones.' The exact derivation of the moniker always eluded Max, but from the first time he saw his brother in a fist fight he realized that Robert's nickname had an association with destruction at its core. That's what Bones did; he destroyed other boys, and then later in life, men. In a scrap or a brawl, and most certainly in a battle, he reduced his opponents to bones, to ashes, to dust. Everyone respected and liked him, and not just because he was tough as fuck. He seemed to be moving towards something larger than life, and his movement created a certainty that inspired easy confidence in those that chose to follow him.

He was outstanding at creating lasting memories in the minds of those that knew him best, and as a consequence, Max had some well imprinted childhood vignettes. There was Robert's attempt to water Mr.

Bradshaw's thirsty sows with the balance of Grace's crab apple vino. Robert once said that if you'd never seen a pig drunk at high noon then you simply hadn't lived. And then there was his stunning and gymnastic freefall from the top deck of the old railroad trestle while escaping a posse of fundamentalist Bible College fanatics. Not to mention the Tom Sawyer-like raft ride down the Saskatchewan River with the bikini clad Federbach sisters, a bottle of Captain Morgan, and a quarter ounce of chronic – gradually rounded up by two good humored Mounties at the urging of concerned parents.

On his thirteenth birthday, Robert sent himself a subscription to *Soldier of Fortune* magazine.

"What's this?" asked Grace.

"It's from Granddad Jack," said Robert.

"Jesus, Glenn, look at this. What's your dad trying to do, encourage our son to join the foreign legion?" said Grace.

She would have preferred to find Robert leafing through *Playboy*, rather than reading war stories and rifle reviews in a pseudo-military publication that advocated the virtues of a mercenary lifestyle.

But that was the sort of kid Robert was, streetwise beyond his years; willing to exploit certain sensitivities in the McVista family to get what he wanted. Although the act caused a stir of distress for his parents, it was a brazen move that Max still couldn't help but admire, even after all these years.

Glenn had fled to Canada to avoid the Vietnam draft, but his father had viewed the act as nothing less

than treason. As a result, Glenn had not been on speaking terms with his father for years; although the two men did, at the grandmother's behest, communicate periodically.

"I'm going to call that old bastard and tell him that if he thinks he can pull this kind of shit, he's got another thing coming. I mean, what sort of message is he sending our boys?" said Glenn.

As soon as the call was placed, Robert assumed the charade was up. While Glenn waited for an answer, Robert looked at Max with a sealed lip grin.

Much to Robert's surprise and Max's perplexed fascination; however, their Granddad told their father he was simply sending his adventurous grandson a subscription to an adventurous magazine. It was as if Robert had telepathically requested his grandfather to be an accomplice in a covert family prank.

There were long pauses between Glenn's side of the conversation and whatever was being said on the other end by the grandfather. Glenn's utterances, however, were enough to create a sketch of the tension.

"Robert's too young to be reading shit like that."

"Is that right?"

"An understanding of geopolitics?"

"Who says?"

"Oh, now Trudeau is a communist. For Christ sakes, Dad, don't lecture me."

"Yes."

"They are."

"Maybe this fall, I don't know. Why don't you guys try to come up here?"

"Turkey."

"I will."

"No, you can't."

"Bye Dad."

Grace and Glenn allowed Robert to keep the *Soldier Of Fortune* subscription despite their grave misgivings. And Bones kept it current for at least six more years. He'd long since gone to the deserts of Kuwait, even as his parents still continued receiving magazine renewal cards through the post.

In the years that followed, Robert never told Max whether he and his grandfather ever discussed the subscription, but, for Max, it seemed poetically fitting to imagine that the unspoken collusion was taken to the grave without ever being further mentioned.

* * *

So, this is what everything has come to, he thought; a hay loft, a Rubik's Cube, and nine months of an indeterminate sentence served. In general terms, he could recall his childhood with decent accuracy, but with the extraordinary details he was accumulating on his second run through, 1984 was fleshed out to the point of nausea.

He remembered Duncan telling him to have fun with the experience, not to be fearful, just to relax and enjoy. But the dreamscape before him was not the one Duncan had assured him of. It was more than an

exceptional recollection; it was a life relived with a brain full of the previous one.

Insynnium, through some rare alchemy, had taken his fixed and leaden memory and transformed it into a virtual living replica of his past. He controlled his destiny as much or as little as he had in the ordinary course of events that was his life in 2004. He felt the pain of an ache, the itch of wool, and the tickle of hair. If he cut himself, he bled. Food tasted as food should, or shouldn't. Water made him wet. There was no doubt that he was a fully functioning 11-year-old boy in 1984, with the experience and knowledge of a thirty-one year-old man from 2004.

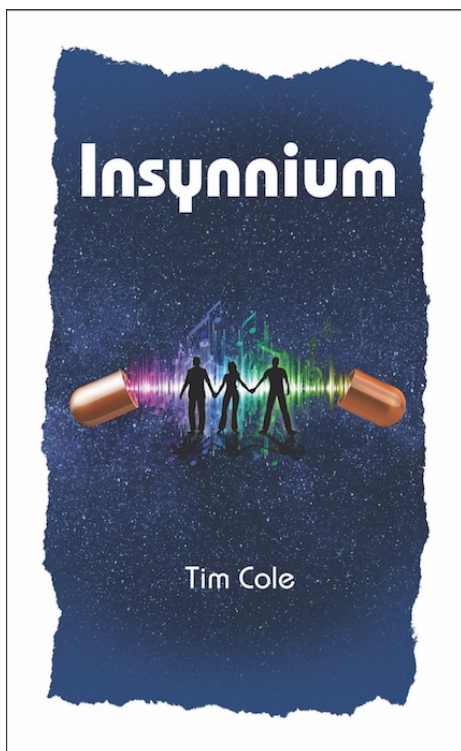
He had gained access to an alternate universe. A place both identical and independent in all respects from the one in which he'd come. Months had passed, however, and he was starting to worry that he might be trapped in the situation for the remainder of his natural life. He had dreams about a future that he'd already lived, and thought about people he knew but hadn't even met. He kept telling himself the situation would 'autocorrect'; that the drug would leave his system and he'd wake up. But sometimes the thought occurred that he might be dead, and that this was the after-life. Supposedly, death made everything pass before your eyes, but at this glacial speed, it would be a slow version of hell. Thoughts like this made it difficult for him to continue acting in the interests of chronological integrity and personal preservation, both of which might not ultimately matter.

Often things didn't seem fair when he was eleven, and now that he'd become eleven again, it was positively perverse. He couldn't drive a car legally or get into an R-rated film. Even sneaking the occasional Kokanee involved more vigor and evasiveness than he could consistently muster.

And then there was Tara, his grade six crush, who now looked like a little girl. He supposed that through some morality distorting lens he could make out with her by rationalizing their age equivalency, but it was the sort of action that would require self-deception beyond his capacity.

A converse and tempting option for a roll in the hay, however, was the regional librarian, Ms. Mayflower, who was hotter and more voluptuous than he remembered. It was a frustration of the first order to know that there was nothing he could say or do to alter her vision of him as a child.

He had selected three capsules of Insynnium dated, '1984', because he longed for a nostalgic visit to his home, a prelapsarian glimpse into his childhood. He ignorantly assumed that the drug would simply intensify his recollections in the same dreamy and vicarious way it had on other occasions. Had he known he'd be time travelling, he would have chosen the birth of Grunge or the impeachment of Bill Clinton as possible kick-off points instead; now those were years, he told himself, that he could have done something with.



Three college friends are reunited by a mysterious sleeping pill known as Insynnium. Rachel, Max, and Duncan explore what their lives once were and have since become in this dark comedy about the power of secrets and the mutable nature of identity. The three will be pulled into a vortex of memories, dreams, and music that will alter all they know.

Insynnium

by Tim Cole

**Order the complete book from the publisher
[Booklocker.com](https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/10108.html?s=pdf)**

<https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/10108.html?s=pdf>
**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**